

# **Oral Health**

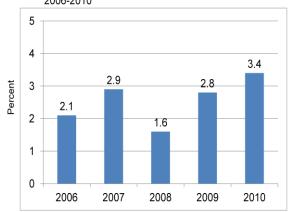
A healthy mouth is more than just a nice smile. Good oral health helps us eat, drink, speak and express emotions. Even though diseases of the mouth (oral diseases) are nearly 100 percent preventable, Colorado kids miss about 7.8 million school hours every year because of mouth pain. Safe, inexpensive preventive measures such as water fluoridation and dental sealants are available, but many children lack access to these interventions, and cavities are still the most common chronic disease of childhood. Nationally, the number of children between ages 2 and 5 with cavities has increased 15 percent during the past decade. An estimated 42 percent of working-age Coloradans and approximately 67 percent of Colorado adults over 65 years of age do not have dental benefits. Access to regular preventive care and interventions is necessary to help Colorado win the battle against oral diseases.

## Why is this important?

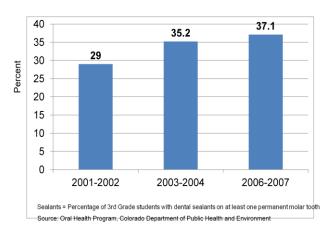
Oral health is an essential part of overall health. Everyone can be affected by oral disease, even people without teeth. Poor oral health can escalate into far more serious problems later in life. Cavity-causing bacteria can be passed from parents to children. Children without dental sealants (protective tooth coatings) and communities without fluoride in their water are unprotected and at a higher risk of tooth decay at every age. Periodontal disease (gum disease) is linked to cardiovascular disease, diabetes and stroke. Medications to control chronic diseases can cause a dry mouth, leading to fast-growing cavities. People with ill-fitting dentures are at risk for nutritional deficiencies and poor quality of life.

#### Where are we?

Percent of Colorado parents reporting that their child (age 1 through 5) first went to the dentist by 12 months of age, 2006-2010



Percent of 3rd grade children in Colorado with sealants, Oral Health Basic Screening Survey



Source: Colorado Child Health Survey, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

#### Where do we want to be?

#### By 2016,

- 75 percent or more of the population served by community water systems receives optimally fluoridated water;
- increase to 4.6 percent the percentage of Colorado infants who get a dental checkup by age 1 year;
- Increase to 39 percent the percentage of Colorado third-graders who have dental sealants on permanent molars.

#### ★ Colorado's 10 Winnable Battles ★

#### What is being done?

Most oral diseases in Colorado can be eliminated if the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

- supports the development of more school-based sealant programs in targeted schools and varnish for young children;
- provides fluoridation support and training locally to water engineers;
- provides fluoridation equipment grants;
- works with local public health agencies to provide oral health promotion and linkages to dental providers;
- streamlines data collection (surveillance) for youth and adults to identify areas of need and focus resources to address disparities;
- works with partners to align oral health projects across the state to improve oral health literacy and link resources to underserved populations.

### **High-risk groups**

Colorado kids miss an estimated 900,000 days of school every year due to mouth pain. This increases the achievement gap, making it difficult for children to perform as well as their peers. This nationwide trend, reported in 2007 by the Department of Health and Human Services, is especially true for poor and minority children. They continue to suffer the most from dental decay and receive less preventive care, such as tooth sealants (Colorado Oral Health Survey).

Almost a third of Hispanic children in Colorado have untreated cavities and/or decay. Hispanic adults have similar rates. More than 40 percent of African-American adults have lost five or more teeth because of cavities.

Low-income children who visit a dentist by age 1 year are less likely to get cavities and need expensive dental procedures or emergency room visits. Regular dental visits reduce average dental costs by nearly 40 percent.

## **Underlying causes**

Poor oral health has many causes. At the start of life, parents can transmit cavity-causing bacteria directly to their children. Less than half of the state's at-risk children use their Medicaid and/or CHP+ dental benefits. Approximately 42 percent of Colorado adults do not have dental insurance; an estimated 67 percent of Coloradans over age 65 do not. Many areas of Colorado do not have dentists or hygienists, and many of them do not accept Medicaid or CHP+ or treat young children. Finally, oral health care must be part of primary prevention for every Coloradan. The following factors impact oral health:

- Our mouths: Bacteria, acid-base level (pH), saliva flow, chronic diseases affecting the mouth
- Our children: Regular dental exams, brushing twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing
- Our families: Families' overall health status, nutrition, daily habits, income and composition
- *Our community:* Community water fluoridation, resources for oral health, providers who accept new patients and patients with Medicaid or CHP+, social and cultural attitudes toward oral care